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FREEDOM AGENDA

SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: PARLIAMENT SPEAKER SUPPORTS ELECTORAL DISTRICT REFORM, SAYS PARTIES WILL EVENTUALLY FORM

REF: A. KUWAIT 4933

[¶](#)B. KUWAIT 4480

[¶](#)C. KUWAIT 4378

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[¶](#)11. (C) Summary: National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi told the Ambassador December 5 that discussions on reducing the number of electoral constituencies were important to Kuwait's political future, but complicated due to a lack of consensus on the number and shape of electoral districts. He faulted the GOK for not having a clear vision and failing to advocate a position, and said there was no unified position among the 50 MPs. He said that larger electoral districts would lead to elections based on issues and the eventual formation of political parties.

Redistricting would also facilitate the political participation of women, but he was not hopeful that a woman would be elected to Parliament in 2007 and predicted that women voters would support Islamist candidates. He praised GOK-National Assembly cooperation on the new press law and predicted that it would soon be passed. Commenting on succession, he said Kuwaitis accepted that PM Shaykh Sabah would one day become Crown Prince, but in the interim, enjoyed gossip on ruling family internal strife. End summary.

Electoral Reform Necessary, but GOK Not Making its Case

[¶](#)12. (C) During a December 5 meeting, the Ambassador queried National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi on the ongoing debate about reducing the number of electoral constituencies from twenty-five to ten. Al-Khorafi said the issue was difficult and complicated by the fact that there was no consensus on the appropriate number of constituencies -- five or ten -- or their geographical boundaries. He criticized the GOK for submitting last year two redistricting plans, each of which calls for ten districts although the boundaries are different, and said there had been sufficient support for the first plan to pass. He said the Government had so far failed to make its preference clear and, without staking out a position and aggressively promoting it, he does not predict that change will come soon. He would not be surprised if there were still 25 electoral districts at the time of the 2007 parliamentary elections.

Parties are Inevitable, but Not Right Now

[¶](#)13. (C) He further remarked that redistricting would drastically affect Kuwaiti politics. Fewer districts and a bigger electorate in each constituency would reduce personal contact between MPs and voters, thereby forcing elections to be issue-driven rather than constituent service-driven. Responding to the Ambassador's question about whether a

decrease in the number of electoral constituencies would lead to the formation of recognized political parties, Al-Khorafi said political parties were inevitable, but it was not the right time. Referring to his October speech at Parliament's opening, he said Kuwait could not deny the presence of political groupings which already form a basis for a party structure, but time was needed to prepare the legal framework for parties and to educate the populace (ref B). As long as tribal affiliation, religion, and family connections, resulting in "50 MPs and 50 parties," dominated Kuwaiti political life, parties were not viable.

Women Will Back the Islamists

¶4. (C) Al-Khorafi shared the view that reducing the number of constituencies would facilitate the political participation of women. He doubted, however, that women would be elected to Parliament in 2007 and predicted that women voters would support conservative and Islamist candidates. He reported that women already vote in university elections and in elections for neighborhood cooperative boards, emphasizing that both groups are dominated by Islamists (ref C). He feared that an Islamist-controlled Parliament would push for stricter laws to even further segregate men and women in public places. The Ambassador asked whether people in Kuwait were watching the situation in Egypt. The Speaker said, "Egypt needed what happened." Given low voter turnout, he discounted the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood on Egyptian politics, but said it was a good lesson that the "age of 99.9 per cent voter participation ended with the fall of Saddam Hussein."

¶5. (C) Further commenting on women's political

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participation, he said a quota for female representation in Parliament would require a constitutional amendment and was a non-starter. In his view, the GOK had done the heavy lifting to secure universal suffrage and Kuwaiti women needed to work hard to exercise their rights.

New Press Law Opens the Door for Newspaper Ownership

¶6. (C) Turning to other legislation under consideration, Al-Khorafi said the GOK and Parliament overcame on December 4 an important hurdle related to the proposed Press and Publications Law: the GOK accepted the National Assembly position that any complaint under the law would be heard by the courts and not the Cabinet, a significant change in the law. He noted a few other "sticking points," but said Minister of Information Anas Al-Rasheed would soon meet with the Education, Culture, and Guidance Committee of the National Assembly to clarify aspects of the legislation. He anticipated that the law would be passed during this Assembly session and commented that it was a good law in the sense that it would give greater freedom for newspaper ownership. He expressed, concern, however, that a plethora of papers in a small community could lead to use of the press for blackmail and influence-peddling. Nevertheless, that was the price of freedom of speech and the papers and their editors would bear the burden to not be used for unlawful purposes. He added that the GOK was not pushing the new Labor Law and commented that any draft legislation having a lot of articles was difficult for Parliament to approve. MPs preferred short laws and were loathe to act quickly on anything, such as the Tax Law, that might be considered a burden to Kuwaiti citizens.

Succession Debate is Yesterday's News

¶7. (C) Recapping the succession debate, Al-Khorafi said Kuwaitis liked to talk and internal disputes among the ruling family made for good subject matter. It was common knowledge

that Shaykh Salem's comments on succession were based on personal issues regarding wealth and position. He said all Kuwaitis knew of and understood the Crown Prince's condition and accepted that Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah would eventually become Crown Prince. Nevertheless, Kuwait was a sentimental society and a special relationship existed between the citizens and CP Shaykh Saad; there was support for leaving the CP in office as the Saudi royal family had done with King Fahd. Kuwaitis trusted that in the event of the CP's death, the family would handle the matter. He added that while Parkinson's disease had physically debilitated the Amir, his mind was still sharp and when he asked the Speaker to comment on succession, we was sending a clear message to Shaykh Salem and his supporters (ref A).

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